

Luke 13:6-9

Compost

June 7, 2020

Then Jesus told this parable: ‘A landowner had a fig tree planted in a vineyard; and she came looking for fruit on it and found none. So she said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” The gardener replied, “Please dear owner, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

We are entering another Sunday on our gardening series. Several weeks back I spoke of seeds, and then I reflected on soil and “The Great Gardener”. Today I shift to an element which most farmers appreciate—fertilizer. Jesus even had thoughts on this point as our scripture text suggests. I have a composter in my back yard. In my domestic life it is I who takes out the scraps. I deposit egg shells, onion husks, potato peelings, toe nails and other sundry treats into the big black orb which is our composter. The Black Orb is not pretty and sometimes offers a less than pretty smell, but we nonetheless compost. Why the compost bin? Why the stench? Why? Compost happens and compost is good—good for us, good for those around us, good for the ecosystem. Today I will reflect on the role compost has in our personal and communal life. Before I launch into reflections on the important role of fertilizer / compost I should highlight a few nuances of our text from Luke 13.

On the surface it might seem odd to have a fig tree in a vineyard-- vineyards, after all, are for growing grapes. If we read it symbolically, however, it makes a great deal of sense. Vineyards were an oft used metaphor for the people of God (Isaiah 5 for example) and figs were often associated with the Temple. The parable is about the fruitfulness of the Temple among the people of God. According to Jesus the situation is this: Give that lousy underperforming institution called the Temple one more chance, enrich it, and if it does not produce then it must go. In this parable I suspect God is the landowner and Jesus is the gardener. I would like to think Jesus comes to us and our underperforming institutions and our broken world and advocates for us—enriching our soil under his expert care so that we might bear fruit.

I heard a report on CBC radio this morning (Wednesday) about the effects of COVID-19 on mental health--- we all need additional nutrients these days to stay afloat. I watch the news and see the city I once called home (Minneapolis) burning down socially and physically exposing the racial tensions which have existed for centuries-- we all need additional nutrients these days. I am grateful to the Landowner (God) to permit Jesus (the Good Gardener) another chance to nurse life into our brokenness. Jesus does this with the compost: the essence of things past.

The compost pile is a most natural form of fertilizer. Compost can, in fact, be a rich metaphor for the Christian life. Reflecting on this interconnection author Judy Cannato writes:

Yes, [compost] stinks and it's ugly. But it is one of nature's most amazing metamorphoses. Every serious gardener knows that compost is not a pile of garbage but life itself, the secret for nourishing and maintaining a garden of beauty and bounty. In a compost pile, nature transforms our unused, unwanted scraps into nutrient-rich soil. Like the garden itself, the compost heap rests during the cold winter months under the snow, slowly changing in form from a pile of dead leaves and rotting food into humus, the rich natural fertilizer. The brown of dead leaves provides the carbon; the green of fruits and vegetables, as well as the eggshells and coffee grounds, are rich in nitrogen. Bacteria and fungi, earthworms and insects break the material down into wondrous humus. Rain, air, time and temperature transform the worthless and the unwanted into the richest of soil for the most bountiful of harvests. In this Easter springtime, composting can be more than a gardening miracle but a living parable of the transformation we can affect in our own lives. In God's time, with God's grace, we can transform our "scraps" – the hurts and disappointments of our lives – into a rich "humus" in which the life and love of God can take root and flourish. The Easter Jesus shows us that change is always possible, that we can always begin again and again and again. Like good composting, such transformation demands the hard work of surrendering our brokenness, our insensitivity, our stubbornness and our self-absorption and placing it all in the "pile," then trusting God to work [the] miracle of transformation. Spring's compost teaches us to embrace.¹

I like that imagery. And this inspiration from Cannato invites further reflection.

#1 - Brown dead stuff: dried grass, dead leaves are rich in carbon. Who knew death was necessary to life? What has to die within me – what self-image and hurtful behavior has to die in order for a happier marriage and more integrated self and better leadership skills? What needs to die in national myths and personal resentment to permit reconciliation among black and white, indigenous and non-indigenous? Painful, painful deaths. There is no other way. The brown dead leaves are necessary.

#2 – Green stuff. Living organic material is necessary also for the compost pile: fruit and veg, green grass clippings and even weeds are important for compost. The green heats up the compost pile, accelerating the work of

¹ Judy Cannato, "The Compost Pile" in *Weavings* (January/February 2001).

disintegration and transformation. The green parts of our spiritual lives are the untapped or unrecognized potential – what is still green in us? Our unused talents? Our undiscovered artistic and athletic abilities? This greenness does not diminish as we age. Learning something new, a sense of humour, courage and acceptance, colouring-- these are all green matter that gives life to ourselves and those around us. As we process the dead stuff we need to add the green stuff.

#3 - Moisture. Having too much or too little slows down the transformation of the compost pile. Rain is good but can also be too much. Composters have lids to control and retain moisture. We produce moisture as well. Tears are not a bad thing. We should weep for losses we have experienced and the brokenness around us. At a certain point, though, too many tears do not help the compost process internally or socially. It is probably true that those who tear up less would do well weep more—for themselves, their families, their communities—and those who are inundated with tears would benefit from a spiritual weeping tile.

#4 - Air. Compost needs to breathe, gently turning the pile with a pitchfork or shovel allows the air to move through. My interior pile needs gentle stirring too, which I do through walking and prayer – the gentle self-examination and turning over worries to God. This allows the Breath of Life, the Holy Spirit, to aerate those rotting pieces of Patrick which have been building up in his black orb.

#5 - Bio-degraders as well as earthworms are essential to the process. I know my backyard soil is in good shape when I run across earthworms. If they like the soil so will the root vegetables and tomatoes. The worms move through the earth and mess, digesting it, and helping it along. We, too, have organisms that help God process the stuff of our lives. Friends and family who gather in person or via technology are an important part of this process. They listen, encourage and ask tough questions. We need earthworms in our lives—the ones who take the mess we are and delve through it. These people are wonderful earthworms. We all need soul friends—Christian earthworms who help us process the challenging things of our lives into something God can use.

We bring our ourselves, our compost, to church and we yield to the work of God. And then we wait, sometimes season after season with expectation that the Gardener who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it (Phil 1:6).

I have given a broad understanding of what compost might contribute to our spiritual journey, and I also want to take a few moments to consider what compost might mean for God. We need to give thanks to God, for God is patient and the gardener is a gift.

God sits with us and our fractured world. God ruminates with us and biodegrades with us and desires that we and our institutions produce good fruit. To trust in a God of patience is a serious endeavour. And yet that is where we happen

to be. Alan Kreider authored an amazing book on patience which sits on my book shelf. It is a book from which our Caring and Visitation chair, Kathleen Regier, offered a closing meditation to one of our meetings not long ago.² God is patient and we are invited to be patient.

Patiently we await the transformation of the rubbish in our lives and world. Patiently we await the effects of improved soil within our lives and community. Patiently we await the blossoming of the next generation. Patience. The fruits of the spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience”.... Patience. God is patient; perhaps we can be as well. This, though, is veering off from the compost pile with which God gardens.

We are mixed elements-- me and we, you and I. God and Jesus, blessings be upon them, take time to work with that raw stuff known as you and me. Jesus is stirring us. God is nudging us. Jesus is aerating us. This is not a bad thing. It may not be the most comfortable, but it helps the soil and our souls. Compost, who would have thought it, to be so meaningful and magical?

In closing, many of us have been sitting and stewing in some form of social and physical isolation. It is almost like being in a composter where various items of biodegradable rubbish simply accumulate. God is seeking to supplement this raw material with leaves and grass and tea leaves. We hope that the residual from this season of composting may produce richness from which good fruit may grow. We hope that in due course that seeds might grow, blossom, and bear good fruit.

Good Fruit (you shall know them by their fruits, the fruits of the spirit, and so on). That will be the topic of my next sermon, so stay tuned. It has been enough for today, I think, to reflect on that soil / that fertilizer/ that compost which contributes to the life within us and among us.

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² Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan): Baker Academic: 2016).